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ABSTRACT

Objectively speaking, there has been great historical progress in the educational and developmental opportunities for children and adolescents. However, this progress is not reflected either in an actual improvement of the "qualify of life" or in the subjectively perceived chances of education of adolescents in and out of school. Empirical support for this proposition comes in the observation that symptoms of stress do not only appear in students whose achievements are rated as poor. In this paper an attempt is made both to discuss factors of stress in 14- to 18-year-old students in and out of school and at the same time to point out the adolescent's own subjective perception of some of those factors by means of an empirical investigation. Factors external and internal to school must be seen as standing in a close relation of interaction to each other. The kind and intensity of mental and social stress is explained by combining an "objective" analysis with a "subjective" one. School is looked at both as a system of social order, organization and interaction, and as a realm of experience and a social environment for students. On the basis of these considerations, the conception of "stress" is discussed in the context of a meta-theoretical model of the subject who is productively managing his or her reality. (Author/BZ)

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by

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Societal and Organisational Factors of Stress on Students in School

KLAUS HURRELMANN

SUMMARY *In this paper an attempt is made both to discuss factors of stress in 14- to 18-year-old teenage students in and out of school and at the same time to point out the adolescent's own subjective perception of some of those factors by means of an empirical investigation. Factors external and internal to school must be seen as standing in a close relation of interaction to each other. The kind and intensity of mental and social stress is explained by combining an 'objective' analysis with a 'subjective' one. School is looked at both as a system of social order, organisation and interaction, and as a realm of experience and a social environment for students. On the basis of these considerations, the conception of 'stress' is discussed in the context of a meta-theoretical model of the subject who is productively managing his or her reality.*

SOMMAIRE *Dans cet article, l'auteur a tente d'une part de debattre des facteurs de tension des eleves ages de 14 a 18 ans dans l'ecole et hors de l'ecole, d'autre part (et en meme temps) de "pointer" leur propre perception de ces facteurs au moyen d'une enquete empirique. Il y a des facteurs externes et internes a l'ecole qui doivent etre analyses comme etant entre eux en etroite relation. La nature et l'intensite des tensions psychiques et sociales est explique en utilisant une analyse objective et une analyse subjective. L'ecole est percu comme un systeme ou regnent l'ordre social, l'organisation et l'interaction, et aussi comme un lieu favorisant pour les etudiants les experiences et la vie sociale. En partant de ces considerations, l'idee de 'stress' est discute dans un contexte de modele "metatheorique" de l'individu qui assure la gestion de son realite a lui.*

Objectively speaking, there has been great historical progress in the educational and developmental opportunities for children and adolescents. However, this progress is not reflected either in an actual improvement of the 'quality of life' or in the subjectively perceived chances of education of adolescents in and out of school. Empirical support for this proposition comes in the observation that mental and social symptoms of stress do not only appear in students whose achievements are rated as poor and who are failing because of the demands for achievement and behaviour in school; they are also increasingly appearing in students who seem to excel at the demands of the organised school activity and who are acknowledged by their teachers as having good intellectual and social competence. Thus it cannot only be failure towards the demands of the system which is an initiator, emphasiser or trigger of stress for many students, but also successful adaptation to the system, which has a 'pathogenic' effect.

If we wish to solve these problems, we must turn to the tension between (a) the aims of school organisation, demands on achievements and behaviour in school and patterns of orientation and interpretation which form its basis, on the one hand and (b) developmental tasks specific to certain phases of life and processes of socialisation on the other. Let us have a look at the situation in the Federal Republic of West Germany.

(1) Societal Factors of Stress on Students

This tension has obviously flared up in the last two or three decades. In this time period the social status of the educational system has changed considerably, parallel to economical, social and cultural processes of change. Since the 1960s one can note a large increase in the demand for qualifying educational courses for grades 5 through 10 (Sekundarstufe I) in West Germany. Since this time the educational system has changed drastically in a quantitative manner: for each 100 employed persons, the number of students at schools and universities was 33.5 in the F.R.G. in 1960, in 1980 it was 48.1. These numbers explicitly underline the strong attraction of the field of education as compared to the field of employment (Meulemann, 1982, p. 229). With the rise of the political and infrastructural importance of the school system the educational chances for each adolescent have increased: The proportion of pupils attending the Realschule (leading to O levels) and Gymnasium (A levels) in 7th grade pupils rose from 26% in 1960 to 49% in 1978. In the mean time this ratio has clearly passed the 50% mark. At the same time the proportion of students attending Hauptschule (classes 5 to 10 at an elementary school) has gone down. During the past 20 years, the chances of acquiring the Mittlere Reife (O levels) and the Abitur (A levels) have more than doubled (BMBW, 1982, p. 62).

Not only is the interest in highly qualifying courses of education increasing, the realised quota of transition to the Realschule and Gymnasium and the quota of passing through and finishing these schools is also increasing. Out of those students in the state of North-Rhine-Westphalia who were sent to the first grade of the Gymnasium, 40% received the Abitur in 1951. Fifty-six per cent received this in 1961 and 75% in 1970. Thus the tendency is rising. Corresponding statistics for the Realschule are similar. Therefore the proportion of students who go through the Realschule and Gymnasium from the first to the last grade has strongly increased (Drewek & Harney, 1982).

As seen from these findings, *educational expansion has taken place within the course of the existing school system in West Germany.* Attempts of building up alternatives which have the same value as the Realschule and Gymnasium were not generally accepted. The attraction of the traditional careers at the Realschule and Gymnasium has been shown to be extremely strong. Hence the importance of higher qualifying graduations has also established itself in the future plans of those families who traditionally were not orientated towards the Realschule and Gymnasium. In the course of the educational expansion there occured an inclusion of more and more students from all social groups of the population into the existing types of school of secondary education.

The effects of this enormous upheaval of social structures of education begins to emerge. An unpreventable, but often disregarded consequence is the modification of the theoretical value of the educational courses of the Realschule and Gymnasium and the exchange value of graduation certificates from these types of school. A highly qualifying educational course, successfully completed by 22% of an age-class

today, can not carry the same elite-character as one, which—even one generation earlier—was only run through by a tenth. The Mittlere Reife, acquired by more than 41% of an age-class (including the Abitur students by more than 55%) today, can not have the same importance as a licence of entry to occupational careers as the one, which was formerly acquired by only a quarter of the corresponding age group. Meanwhile the graduation of the Sekundarstufe I represents a kind of 'cultural standard equipment' for the young citizen of West Germany. It has become a necessary instrument for entry into medium and higher levels of occupational careers and especially for entry into the qualified business and service occupations. Even the Abitur is increasingly used for entry not only into college but also for an occupation. A general education which goes beyond compulsory school time has become an obligatory requirement for occupational training.

(1.1) *Disappointed and Disconcerted Status Expectations as Initiators of Stress*

How is this altered structure reflected in the educational expectations and the plans for the future of students and their parents? Objectively, their situation has not become more favourable. In a time of age groups with high birth rates and an extremely tense situation on the labour market, no student can expect with any certainty that a vocational occupation will await him/her after school. The only potential chance open to all adolescents for arming themselves against the uncertainty of the future course of occupation comes in optimizing initial chances for training and employment by attempting to acquire the most qualified and most widely useable school graduation. This uncertain situation therefore increases the demand for educational courses at high levels and for the number of graduates. However, their situation has not improved for this reason. Rather, it has objectively deteriorated, because a realistic chance of finding a safe and privileged reception in the occupational system only exists if certificates are acquired which are well above average. The perspectives of the future plans thus become confused for all groups of the population, but especially,

(a) the group of graduates according to whose family tradition a qualified graduation is *not normal*, because the achievements produced by additional effort do not effect security of an improved starting position, and

(b) the group of graduates according to whose family tradition a qualified graduation is *normal*, because the previously self-evident expectation of finding a reception in the university system which is adequate to their training, and a reception in the occupational system which is adequate to their status, can not be guaranteed.

Consequently, in spite of collectively and individually increased efforts in the present system, there is no definite reward for such efforts. The increased competition makes graduation certificates both more important and less valuable. A person with no graduation loses further educational and social chances; the person with graduation has no guarantee for its redeemability.

The educational expansion, which has statistically improved the individual chances of education, has shown side-effects which may become an initiator of stress for the students:

(1) In the consciousness of teachers, students and an interested public *the predominant unchanged concept is that a highly qualified graduation would have to guarantee—either directly or after a highly qualified follow-up training at the*

university—an exceptional position in the occupational system. The idea that a good school education has a high intrinsic value and a value for the general development of personality of adolescents did not meet general acceptance. The predominate understanding of an instrumentally orientated school education must inevitably lead to disappointment and often to mental and social stress. Consequently, a growing pessimism about the estimation of educational chances looms large in the population. Since the 1950s, the confidence that school education might gain importance for one's own life plans has continually declined; especially for those age groups which had the benefit of objectively improved conditions of training (Meulemann 1982, p. 248).

(2) In such a situation, those groups of students, who have learned to reveal their achievements in a manner which is acknowledged and appreciated in the school system, have advantages in the competition. From experience, these include mainly children from families of employees, civil servants and self-employed persons, who have already gone through a style of education similar to that at school. *At the same time, however, there is an extremely high pressure of expectations from the families of these children, especially if parents themselves reached a higher level of school education.* This pressure of expectations can become stressful for these children if there are performance failures. The parents from these social classes have 'something to lose': their own social status, which could only be maintained in part or not at all with failure of their children in school. Therefore, they react sensitively to all symptoms which could deter the chances of entry to highly qualifying school education, or the chances of success within it for their children. They pass this sensitivity on to their children. *The process of educational expansion is obviously perceived as status threat in this sense, since it was supported in the last two decades by reformatory measures of educational politics, which have increased the proportion of students on the whole and particularly the proportion of students from groups of the population which were so far disadvantaged in highly qualifying educational careers in school.* It is anxiously observed that the educational careers of students have become increasingly dependent on the efficiency reports and grading decisions of teachers. This process is found to be an interference in the family autonomy of the plans for life, as an infringement of the state so to speak. This uneasiness is either intentionally or subconsciously passed on to the children.

(3) Groups of students from working class families, who generally have considerable disadvantages in the competitive situation just described, face a difficult situation. The entry into the Realschule or Gymnasium is not typical in their family tradition, and therefore creates extremely high stress for the students because of the necessary demands of change alone. The psychological pressure of expectations on the part of the family, however, is comparatively smaller than in middle and upper classes, even though some nervousness obviously spreads because of the increased requirements of entry for qualifying occupational trainings.

These representations of trends can be summarised in a paradoxical aphorism: *The educational system has become a pre-distributor of status and a vehicle for advancement even more than one or two generations before, although objectively, the educational system is less capable than before of accomplishing this task. Educational courses at school are in danger of being estimated and judged even more instrumentally as a means of achieving an end. Thus the educational and cultural function of school is more and more*

repressed, a fact which must inevitably lead to deficits in the pedagogical spectrum of the services of this social institution.

The question arises how the students themselves experience this difficult phenomenon, and which objective and subjective value they attribute to school as a social institution of training.

In an empirical investigation [1], we have made an effort to take stock of the 'subjective view of reality', of 14 to 18 year old adolescents. Broadly speaking, the aim of this study was to explore the qualities of school as a 'field of experience' for the adolescents. School was interesting to us as an 'everyday world of life', the way it is perceived by the adolescents accordingly as a 'construct of consciousness'. It can be assumed that this construct is of basic importance to the adolescents' orientations and actions (Hurrelmann, 1984). Our investigation supplements the existing quantitative analyses in that it interprets qualitative case studies.

The investigation includes interviews with 40 students, 40 teachers and 20 parents from the Ruhrgebiet (mining and industrial center of West Germany). We were interested in reaching students from clearly definable courses of education. In our random sample one half of students came from the Hauptschule (classes 5 to 10 at an elementary school) and one half the Gymnasium. Since we wanted to address students with clearly discriminated balances of success in their previous school careers, in the random sample one half of the students were failing and one half successful. Failing students were those, who at the time of the first inquiry, had just heard that they had to repeat the 8th grade (repeater). Successful students were those who had just received an exceptionally good certificate at this time. We decided to use an open system of inquiry and a qualitative system of analysis for obtaining and processing students' comments. The inquiry consists of semi-structured interviews lasting about an hour each. In these interviews students had the opportunity (mostly in the course of their daily field of experience in school, but following the rules of a different and newly structured situation of communication) to talk about their understanding of school and reality with 'interested strangers'. In the first step of analysis (documented in: Arbeitsgruppe Schulforschung, 1980), the question was to determine how students explain their failure or success and how they connect this event with the estimation of school as a place of work and a field of experience. The comments of the students were confronted and compared both with each other and with those of their teachers.

In the second stage of analysis (documented in: Hurrelmann, 1983b), we not only referred to the interviews from the first phase of inquiry, but also to the following two sequences of talks, which were held with the same students at one year intervals. At three different dates, we were interested in (a) including connections and changes of the interpretations of reality of the students and the social knowledge of orientation and (b) showing which connection these had with their objective situation in the training process. We wanted to examine the way in which perception of tasks and functions of school change in the final phase of compulsory school time and (for a great number of adolescents) up on leaving school. We made use of short biographical documentations of cases. These were interpreted against the background of the given situation in their educational career.

(1.2.) *The Subjective View of the 'Value' of School Education*

In our investigation, we made an effort to examine the students' comments about the meaning and purpose of school on the basis of the interview data. The majority of

the students (and the majority of the teachers as well) see the determination of school tasks in the preparation for future. Meaning is awarded to school in as far as it achieves something for the design and the mastering of the time after school; that is, for the distant future.

Hence, the students oriented themselves by a pattern of interpretation whereby the true meaning of the events in school will still become evident, but where the school attendance has as hidden rationality, which is hardly understandable in the present school routine. *This is the subjective reflection of the social pattern of interpretation "You don't learn for school, but for life": One has to spend 10 to 13 years in moratorium in order to prepare for real life which is still approaching.* One has to have oneself trained intellectually, putting own needs and interests last, in order to gain a good starting position and adequate knowledge for 'entry into life' (Arbeitsgruppe Schulforschung, 1980,: pp. 33 ff).

Bringing to mind what an outside- and remote-controlled motivation, what a massive delay of needs and what an instrumentally determined and meaningless orientation is required from young people still within their development by the power of this social pattern of interpretation, it is surprising how many of them come to terms with this mark of orientation. In our investigation, we could see that endurance is made possible because adolescent students perceive school as a place of work and the school activity is designed as in an industry or bureaucracy, following rules of paid labour. School is perceived as a system of compulsions, whose rational basis one cannot believe to be able to evade and whose legitimacy one does not want to deny. The students submit to these compulsions. Individual needs and interests can, as they have learned, hardly be included in the daily course of acting in school.

With such an indifference towards the business that has to be run, the majority of the adolescent students have obviously made internal peace with the organization 'school', which is not appreciated, but which is nonetheless looked upon as necessary for existence. They do their daily work with more or less interest, in order to be awarded by certificates and grades later on. *The majority of students goes to school with a mixed attitude of an 'employee' and a 'welfare recipient'. They go 'because one has to go'.* The directly useful effect for the 'here' and 'now' is not estimated too highly; they exist within the hope that their commitment will have positive effects on their future prospects for life and occupation.

Increasing numbers of students (in our investigation it is just under half of those questioned) realise how meaningless and at the same time how fragile the formula 'learning for later' is. Formally, it has still always found its exchange value since the longer period of training could be turned into educational graduations which opened up entry into requested and well-paid careers. Today students see realistically that higher qualified graduations like the Mittlere Reife or Abitur are now necessary, but not sufficient conditions for obtaining requested employments. For many students, especially those who are adjusted to school, an irritating and disconcerting background experience has built up here. It is especially those students who are put under pressure by their families to maintain or even to outdo the social status of their parents *qua* school education, who are driven to helplessness, resignation or apathy faced with what seems an infinitely long period of formalized demands on achievements with uncertain result and an increasingly unsafe 'exchange value' for later. The 'active' kinds and degenerations of the mental mastering of such an unsatisfying individual definition of position can range from various tendencies of flight (alcohol, drugs) to aggressiveness towards others and one's self.

It would surely be near-sighted to put direct blame on the institution school and

on teachers for this crisis of meaning and lack of orientation. After all, they are precisely the same processes of alienation which many working adults experience at their places of work. It is problematic how directly and unprepared school drives children and adolescents into conflict with problems of life which even adults can hardly control. A situation has developed in which one could speak of a pathogenic effect of school on children and adolescents who are sensitive to it.

(2) Organisational Factors of Stress on Students in School

The question arises whether these attempts of interpretation can be continued, if one refers to organisational and interactive structures of school and thus considers factors of stress on students 'in school'. Can particular features of school be identified which might make school-age children and adolescents nervous, unconcentrated, unmotivated, timid, indifferent, apathetic or aggressive? Can direct effects of the change in the structure of school which has taken place in the last decades be observed?

Existing empirical investigations into the influence which school as a system of organisation and interaction has on the stress of children and adolescents reveal that it is hardly possible—either theoretically or methodically—to isolate particular factors as causal factors. There are only a few research results from which we could conclude with the desired scientific precision that, e.g. (to name just some very often mentioned school-specific factors), when considered singly, large school units, big classes, complex organisation of school and lessons, overladen and unclear curriculums, high demands on performances, severe rating of performance and pedagogically imprudent teachers, cause basic symptoms of stress for students. Each of these factors plays an important role for the welfare of students; whether, as a single factor, it causes stress which becomes leading to long-term impairments of mental and social welfare is hard to prove (Rutter *et al.*, 1979, pp. 25 ff.; Fend, 1980, pp. 265 ff.).

The investigations at hand reveal that we dispose of much single information and have quite good knowledge about partial connections of variables in this field. *Still it would be wrong to identify single factors mentioned as causal factors for stress on students. One thing could be said: The risk of stress will be present if a combination of several single factors occurs together with an event of failing, which is perceived by the students as being serious and important.* Stress on students can always be perceived when a specific combination of factors occurs which results in an unfavourably influencing 'climate' and which meets a student's personality which is sensitive for this. The individual stress of a child or adolescent in school cannot be considered in isolation from objective organizational constellations and their subjective perception.

(2.1.) *Failing in School as an Initiator of Stress*

The risk of stress is high especially with the occurrence of failure in school. Failure means not being able to meet the demands for achievements and behaviour required by the 'system'. The various forms of appearance and expression of failure (poor grades and certificates) and their institutional consequences (repeating a class, removal or regrading to another school, not receiving a graduation certificate) are emphasisers and initiators of stress specific to school. Therefore, in order to examine the problem exactly, it is important to use the analytical starting point of these events.

Particularly the experience of 'repeating' is represented as a decisive initiator for mental crises of students. 'Repeating' is indeed a pedagogically doubtful measure. This measure will remain unavoidable as long as our school system remains strictly organized into grades and types of school. As a by-product of this organisation so to say, in West Germany more than 300,000 students of all age groups have to repeat an entire grade each year.

The long-range consequences of repeating a class extends from regrading to another school to not receiving graduation certificates and permits of transition. So they can have a far-reaching importance for a student's future career in school and occupation. We know from comparative research that repeating produces psychological and pedagogical effects which are to be judged negatively, although, as a rule, it coincides with an improvement of performance in the new class for a short period. Self-appreciation of talents and the feeling of one's own worth are affected and level of fear is increased. It is decisive how the student himself/herself estimates the 'failure' and this in turn depends on how strong one sees one's own person as responsible for it, how much one considers the situation as something changeable in the future, how significant one considers failing to be, how one's most important persons of contact (fellow students, parents) see it, and how important their judgement is to one (Arbeitsgruppe Schulforschung, 1980 pp. 19, ff.).

(2.2.) *The Subjective View of the Problem 'Failure in School'*

In our investigation of students we also assessed the subjective perception of the problem of 'failure in school'. Since failure occurs so massively, quite stereotypes forms of mastering and assimilation have found acceptance. This makes it harder to identify for certain the degree of 'suffering'. Under the surface of what seems a routine mastering there partly exists considerable embarrassement, which is caused by failure.

The most common mechanism of assimilation is self-accusation: The students regard themselves 'guilty', because they were too lazy, too unconcentrated, or too little interested. In their opinion, however, the students' insufficient attitude to work is linked to the behaviour of their teachers.

They refer to the teacher's lack of abilities in designing lessons, which did not permit them to become the disciplined learning students they would actually like to be. For the majority of failing students, the teachers act as a kind of procurer of rules and standards of performance. By means of their ability to translate these standards appropriately and demanding them within set rules the students experience the demands for achievements in school.

The teachers' styles of behaving and teaching and their ways of dealing with the students is significant for the problem of whether students can accept and master the demands for achievements they have experienced by the teachers. Out of their daily experiences in the lessons they want to be able to deduce both definite and transparent indications of the teacher's expectations and the 'rules of the game' for rating performance. If this definiteness and transparency fails to appear they feel disconcerted, unjustly treated and disorientated. Failure is therefore partly the 'fault' of teachers, who do not play their socially defined role as procurer and who do not meet the task ascribed to school to lead them to an [illegible]vocationally marketable graduation certificate. These students feel like clients of a [illegible]ervices organisation which does not properly carry out an important service (Arbeitsgruppe Schulforschung, 1980 pp. 127, 144).

The teachers, who were also included in our inquiry, do not feel predominantly 'responsible' for a student's failure. They attribute failing both to the learning and working behaviour of the students, which is seen as depending on their personality, on family education and on various conditions of social environment. On the other hand, school conditions such as the organisation of lessons, the contents, or the behaviour of the teacher are ascribed an extremely low value. The possibilities of being able to influence the process of failure in school by means of school are regarded adequately: For the majority of teachers, failure is a problem which is linked to the student's personality. This has extracurricular factors of causation at the most. In their opinion, this problem reveals itself in school as a defect in the learning and performance capacity of the individual student. Most of them 'psychologise' the school system: They develop theories, in which an insufficient child is to be addressed and supported in non-pedagogical ways, and typically set these possibilities only outside the school routine and outside their occupational role (Arbeitsgruppe Schulforschung, 1980 pp. 137, 153).

The types of structure in assimilating and mastering failure by students and teachers reveal how difficult the mental and social situation is for the students concerned. The failing student feels misunderstood and left alone by the teacher, but also insufficiently 'served' at the same time. *As shown in our interview analysis, teachers and students find it hard to take the mutual demands of the system 'school'.* Teachers suffer from the disinterest and lack of motivation of many students, but they deny pedagogical possibilities of intervention. They accept the existence of non-motivated students as a fact which is beyond their influence. Consequently they do not see any possibilities of addressing the students by means of school and didactical communication.

The problems of the teachers' and students' conception of themselves which become apparent here refer to socially rooted processes of estrangement as already mentioned in the first chapter. In the patterns of assimilation represented here the efforts can be perceived *as not having to carry the responsibility for the unpleasant event 'failure' which possibly becomes life-historically important.* I see in this a kind of 'social suppression' of the socially induced pressure of expectations in school.

(3) Consequences in Educational Politics

In conclusion I want to focus briefly upon political and pedagogical consequences for the two fields mentioned here—the 'external' and 'internal' school reform which must be conducted.

(a) For the field of social and educational politics it follows from our results that the incomplete co-ordination between the educational and the occupational system must be remedied. Effective remedial measures could be taken if political measures would be initiated on the labour market. But in addition to this an attempt must be made to make the factors of stress more bearable for the students. All measures which initiate a decoupling of the educational courses of school and the future occupational guarantees of status will reduce the pressure of competition in the school. We must gain for schools a free space for processes of education which do not stand under the dictate of interests of selection and instrumental provisions of aims (Husen, 1979).

(b) In the pedagogical field one has to start from the goal that schools must become a central, social field of experience and life for children and adolescents.

With the formula 'learning for later' and the sticking to a functional conception of education we are no longer doing justice to the changed situation described. The time of school attendance must not be defined as a phase of life in which a renouncement of the present is given for the sake of a future which in any case has become insecure. School must offer children and adolescents as many impulses and challenges as possible for the development of their personality and especially for the development of their social and intellectual competence. School produces 'stress' in so far as it seems to students to be a learning factory which is alien to them. What is needed is a school policy which allows schools to become a sphere of experience for the students. This is the most effective contribution to the removal of the conditions of the development of stress on students.

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NOTE

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